

Apps that will help you keep your resolve

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The 'quantified self' movement has spawned a plethora of apps. Photo: Glenn Hunt

FITTER. Thinner. More productive. There is an app to service every New Year's resolution, and many that will pull all this data together to create a personal annual report.

It's part of a movement known as the Quantified Self, in which enthusiasts collect data - often using their smartphones - on everything from the quality of their sleep to their moods after eating certain foods.

Using apps or other wearable devices, it is possible to track personal data, including how many steps are taken each day, how long we sleep and the number of calories we burn.

The data is collected and turned into interactive dashboards, which help people analyse the information.

Enthusiasts are using these devices to monitor their activities, set goals and build up the sort of picture of themselves that was once only available to elite athletes.

Paul Kittson uses a variety of apps he downloaded to his smartphone to track trends in his moods, sleeping patterns and productivity at work.

Mr Kittson, who works in human resources for the state government, developed an interest in self-measurement following a chronic knee complaint. His physiotherapist asked him to keep track of his activities and rate the pain at a given time on a scale of one to 10.

"It gave me a sense of what was making it worse and what wasn't affecting it, which was good because I was second-guessing myself and worried to go for a walk," he said. "It gave me a sense of freedom."

The experience got him interested in tracking other aspects of his life. He tried tracking what he was eating and used his observations to change his diet, cutting out products he believed flared up his allergies.

Mr Kittson is a co-founder of a group in Melbourne dedicated to the idea of the quantified self, which aims to foster self-knowledge through self-tracking.

Quantified Self groups have formed around the world, where enthusiasts meet to "show and tell" about which aspects of their lives they have been monitoring, detail their findings and present data visualisations illustrating their activities.

Some have embraced the concept to the extent that they track nearly every aspect of their lives. Massachusetts Institute of Technology researcher Deb Roy recorded 90,000 hours of video of the early years of his son's life, while graphic designer Nicholas Felton has created lavishly produced annual reports of his movements, which detail what he had read, where he had travelled and how he had spent his time.

Mr Kittson's fellow Quantified Self Melbourne co-founder, Phil Goebel, a keen rock climber, uses Fitbit, a pedometer-like device which clips onto a belt, to track his sleeping patterns, weight and physical activity. He can then access the data on his smartphone or via a dashboard on his computer to check his progress.

Mr Goebel, a physiotherapy student at Melbourne University, said he was interested in self-tracking for its potential applications in assessing patients.

"It would be a powerful tool for healthcare professionals," he said.

But Monash University medicine lecturer Juanita Fernando said people should be cautious when it came to self-monitoring tools. She said they were a great way of keeping records but people should consult their doctor if they seriously wanted to change their habits.

"There is a danger people think they are taking care of themselves and that they are following the best advice by using these applications. There is an assumption that the designer of the app had some critical knowledge but often that is not the case," Dr Fernando said. She said people should also be aware of their privacy when downloading the apps.

Associate Professor Katina Michael, of the University of Wollongong, said people could also become stressed if they didn't see any improvement in their condition.

"Data can be misinterpreted and we can be misinterpreting reality," she said. "Quantifying yourself doesn't mean you're qualifying yourself."

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